

BUSINESS WEEK
3 December 1979**Books****The secret world
of Richard Helms**

Much of the fascination with that perdurable literary form, the spy novel, stems from the popular conviction that the surface appearance of things is not the real way of the world. We want to know what is going on, but we believe that reality is so harsh, its rules so Byzantine, its demands so unrelenting, that it can be dealt with only behind closed doors where men can ignore the posturing and cant that saturates ordinary lives. We cling to pious platitudes of law and morality because they are so

Through the DDP, the CIA's chief (some would say only) client—the President of the United States—has been able to operate on that level of raw reality that fascinates. Beset by the “long twilight struggle,” as John F. Kennedy put it in his inaugural address, Presidents have sought to deal with intractable problems by using agents of the U. S. government who act in secret and are accountable, ultimately, only to him.

Clandestine intervention has long been accepted as the way things have to be. Secrecy is an operational necessity not merely because it is a contradiction in terms to carry on clandestine activities while one's opponents watch, but also, equally important, because the public that funds the intelligence service would not stomach all that was carried out in its name. So deep-rooted is the need for secrecy that it is practiced even

which the CIA was heavily, although not exclusively, involved. Lansdale's memo requested the CIA's liaison to Mongoose to draft a number of anti-Castro programs, “including liquidation of leaders.” The CIA man protested vehemently to Lansdale the “stupidity of putting this type of comment in writing in such a document.” Suffice it to say, the language was deleted, but the planning went on.

The message, Powers says, is clear: Some matters are so sensitive that they are never recorded or discussed aloud. The regular spiel is that the CIA doesn't consider or cooperate in assassination. The reality is something else again. The CIA follows orders, transmitted by unmistakable gesture, nuance, and indirection. Powers concludes, without explicitly saying so, that John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert were the



The many faces of Richard Helms.

much more bearable than facing up to what needs to be done.

As Thomas Powers shows in his remarkable book, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*, virtually every person associated with the nation's intelligence service since its founding during World War II shared this view of reality. Yet as Powers shows also, that view of reality is critically flawed and has led in large part to the crisis in confidence about intelligence services through which we are living still.

The Man Who Kept the Secrets

By Thomas Powers

Knopf • 393 pp. • \$12.95

Throughout its 35-year history, the Central Intelligence Agency has had three fundamental missions: “intelligence-gathering and analysis, the protection of its own integrity (or counter-intelligence), and political intervention.” Of the three, Powers concentrates on the last—the special operations division long known as the Directorate for Plans (DDP), which brought us the Shah of Iran, the Bay of Pigs, vast turmoil in Chile, several attempted assassinations of political leaders (e.g., Castro, Lumumba, and Diem, some of whom eventually were killed, although not necessarily by the CIA), and countless other acts of political consequence known.

within layers of government already insulated from the public.

Powers calls the technique for diverting attention from what is really going on “the regular spiel”: The CIA will say, for example, that it does not assassinate or cooperate in the assassination of America's political enemies. Thus on Aug. 10, 1962, in the prelude to the Cuban missile crisis, Robert S. McNamara suggested—hypothetically, we are told—at a meeting in Secretary of State Dean Rusk's office that perhaps the solution to the “Castro problem” was to kill him.

The reaction was instantaneous and forceful. Edward R. Murrow, then director of the U. S. Information Agency, torpedoed the suggestion as totally out of order. John McCone, director of the CIA, agreed with Murrow. The minutes of the meeting omitted any reference to McNamara's appalling idea. McCone even phoned McNamara later that same day to protest that such talk was reprehensible and that McCone wouldn't stand for any more of it.

Nevertheless, that did not put the kibosh on plans to terminate Castro—as the modern idiom has it—with extreme prejudice. Two days after the Aug. 10 meeting, a memo appeared from General Edward G. Lansdale, who headed “Oper-

source of the order to “get” Castro, even as Eisenhower had demanded the liquidation of Lumumba.

In involving itself in myriad adventures around the world, the CIA was not acting on its own. It was carrying out a highly specialized service, sometimes well, more often badly, but never as a rogue agency out of control. When caught, as the CIA eventually was, the honorable thing to do was to clam up, as did Richard Helms, who had been at the heart of most of the CIA's business from at least the early 1960s. That is the way things have to be. Leaders of the free world must never appear to countenance many of the things they most want accomplished.

Thirty years in the CIA's employ, six as its director (longer than any other man save Allen Dulles, who was one of its founding fathers), Helms is the quintessential intelligence operative. He believed in the CIA's mission—if not in each of his assignments. He was a talented administrator and a skillful player of Washington's high-pressure bureaucratic game, and he knew when to keep his mouth shut, even when it would result in his conviction for a misdemeanor or akin to perjury before a Senate committee. His story is the CIA's story, the agency's.

In one of his rare public speeches,

CONTINUED

Newspaper Editors in 1971 that "the nation must to a degree take it on faith that we too are honorable men, devoted to her service." No one who knows him, says Powers, doubted his sincerity. Helms, concludes Powers, had "something of a mechanic's attitude toward international relations, and he did not lie awake at night wondering if the CIA had a moral right to do as it did."

Richard Helms was no G. Gordon Liddy, but it is a melancholy fact that his career twisted toward the same end: criminal conviction for believing in the rightness of following orders from the President, regardless of the order and, one is tempted to add, regardless of the President. Helms said he would wear his misdemeanor conviction as a "badge of honor."

The question for us is whether we can regard this profession of honor as anything other than hypocrisy. The answer that emerges from Powers' scrupulously fair and even-tempered book is that we can. Helms was nicked when the gears of our culture failed to mesh: The subculture of honorable men doing foul things honorably could scarcely withstand ventilation by the larger culture that says worthy ends do not justify any means. Through his meticulous and dispassionate reconstruction of the ethos inside the CIA, Powers, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, shows that while their hearts may have been properly situated, the minds of our intelligence officials had drifted rather far. And not just within the CIA. Other senior policymakers, including those in the White House, failed to realize that their electronically secure offices had become almost impenetrable to common sense.

It is possible to make a case for cloak-and-dagger "special operations." But the case depends at least on a punctilious regard for the facts, a refusal to bend those facts at the whim of political desire, and the moral certainty that the policy is right. The flaw at the center of the CIA's 35-year reality is that it did not always collect the facts, often could not honestly assess the facts it had, and bowed too often to unspoken demands that the "boss" be told what he wanted to hear—and the consequence all too often was that U. S. policy was misguided and doomed to fail. Until such time as the CIA can meet these tests, Congress should insist that our intelligence agents incorporate into their view of reality the notion that they must abide by the laws of the land like the rest of us.

—Jethro K. Lieberman

Jethro Lieberman is Legal affairs editor of this magazine and author of How the Government Breaks the Law.